

14 December 1971

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Protective Reaction Strikes

1. Military Impact. Since November 1970, approximately 100 U.S. protective reaction strikes have been flown in North Vietnam, primarily against enemy air defenses in response to continuing enemy attacks on U.S. aircraft. These strikes, involving some 650* attack sorties, have been confined almost exclusively south of the 20th Parallel. In most cases the protective reaction strike involved less than five attack sorties and occurred immediately after a U.S. aircraft had been threatened or attacked. Two major exceptions to this pattern have occurred during the past year. In late March (near the end of Operation Lam Son 719) about 375 attack sorties were flown during five protective reaction strikes. These strikes were apparently precipitated by the rapid build-up of SAM strength in the North Vietnamese Panhandle and an increased number of firings on U.S. aircraft during that period, rather than by any particular firing on a U.S. aircraft. The other major exception occurred on September 21 when 198 attack sorties were flown against North Vietnamese POL storage facilities in Quang Binh Province in response to a build-up of POL in this area prior to the annual dry season supply push.

2. The net military impact of protective reaction strikes against enemy air defenses has been slight. North Vietnamese SAM equipment and AAA weapons are usually widely dispersed and well camouflaged so that damage from any one strike has been limited generally to only one site. Moreover large quantities of these weapons are available around Hanoi and Haiphong and can be easily transported south. Even during the Rolling Thunder campaign, U.S. airstrikes had only a minimal effect on North Vietnam's air defenses. Joint CIA-DIA

*Does not include 228 sorties associated with the Son Tay prison camp raid in late November 1970, which were diversionary in nature rather than protective reaction.

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estimates of damage to air defense equipment in North Vietnam were valued at less than \$100 million during the Rolling Thunder period, compared to imports of air defense equipment of over \$400 million during the same period.

3. The heavy attacks on POL facilities also had little military impact. Post-strike photography showed only minor damage to the storage facilities in Quang Binh Province. One notable success did occur in late April 1971 when USN aircraft flew protective reaction strikes against Quan Lang airfield, after a USN photo-reconnaissance aircraft had been attacked by AAA and SAM units in the vicinity of the airfield. Post-strike photography showed two MIG/21 Fishbed aircraft burning and considerable damage to the airfield. However, damage to the airfield was repaired quickly and MIG's were again operating at Quan Lang within a week.

4. While the protective reaction strikes have done little damage to North Vietnam's air defense capabilities, the massive build-up of air defenses in the southern Panhandle of North Vietnam and the increased aggressiveness of MIG aircraft in recent months is a measure of Hanoi's concern over such activities. Presently, as many as 17 anti-aircraft regiments and 14 SAM battalions may be located in Quang Binh Province, which is unprecedented and by far the largest concentration of firepower ever observed in southern North Vietnam.

5. Political Impact. In assessing the political impact of the protective reaction program on Hanoi, we have relatively little to go on beyond the routine denunciations that surface in the North Vietnamese media after nearly every strike and in Vietnamese Communist speeches in Paris after the more extensive ones.

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We do not have, however, the kind of detailed data required to calibrate the depth of North Vietnamese feelings about the program with precision.

6. Hanoi almost certainly views the intensity of U.S. protective reaction as one good index of Washington's combativeness at any given moment. Any intensification of the bombing effort, and particularly any broadening of it to include substantial numbers of targets unrelated

to AAA and SAM's, would cause heightened fears of further extensions of the bombing and of allied cross-border raids. Conversely, Hanoi would pay close attention to a termination of the strikes, though it probably would not read much significance into a marginal decrease in their number or nature. The question of U.S. overflights of North Vietnam is an especially sensitive one for Hanoi, even setting aside the specific problem of U.S. air reconnaissance that developed after the bombing halt in 1968. In the wake of a halt in the protective reaction program, the North Vietnamese would probably be alert for other U.S. actions that might be interpreted as signs of greater political or military flexibility. (We do not believe there is any chance that this transaction can be worked the other way; i. e., we think it highly unlikely that Hanoi would make political or military concessions of its own simply as a result of a standdown in protective reaction strikes.)

7. Domestically, the protective reaction program has both positive and negative aspects for Hanoi. Certainly Hanoi has trouble explaining to some North Vietnamese why the "defeated" U.S. still manages to conduct air strikes against their country with relative impunity. But most of the populace probably is more or less responsive to the government's line that the raids are proof of the continued need for war-readiness and sacrifice in the North. Thus the protective reaction strikes probably serve, at least to some extent, to stiffen the popular backbone in North Vietnam.

8. In sum, the limited evidence available to us suggests that Hanoi regards the protective reaction program as an annoying but not intolerable nuisance. It is not so damaging that the North Vietnamese would be willing to make any substantial concessions to get it stopped; nor do they give any sign that they anticipate a unilateral U.S. halt in the program. Indeed, they must have undertaken the current build-up of their anti-aircraft defenses in southern North Vietnam in the knowledge that they were thereby risking heavier protective reaction strikes.

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